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FM REO BASRAH
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000041

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: BASRAH CLERIC FEARS CIVIL WAR

REF: BASRAH 40

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CLASSIFIED BY: Louis L. Bono, Regional Director, REO Basrah,
DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. A respected Basrah cleric (name protected) visited the Regional Embassy Office (REO) Basrah May 19 and predicted that civil war could engulf Iraq's oil-rich southernmost province after Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) is implemented. He added that the political parties and security forces in southern Iraq are complicit with the militias who wage war against the Coalition Forces. He expressed hope that the coming U.S.- Iranian talks do not result in what he called "a gift to the enemy." The cleric described his role in organizing the May 9 public demonstrations in which approximately 10,000 Basrahwis protested militia violence, particularly the mortar and rocket attacks directed at the Palace Compound, that inflict death and injury on the civilian population, while calling politicians to task for their inaction and corruption. End Summary.

MILITIAS SEE REO RELOCATION AS VICTORY

¶2. (C) The cleric, arguably the most respected man in Basrah, believes more needs to be done to strengthen the security forces before PIC takes place. (See refTel). He said the militias are positioning themselves for all-out war against each other for control of the province after PIC, expected in August or September. He reported that the militias, particularly the larger ones, such as Ja'ish al-Mahdi, Badr, and Fadhila, are exploring tactical alliances as they jockey for position. He said the withdrawal of the British forces and the U.S. REO from the Palace Compound would be claimed by the militias as a victory over the "foreign forces" and predicted intensified attacks on the U.S. and British installations at the air station. He related that he had advised the British military not to leave the palace so as not to encourage the militias. He also discussed the complex web of collusion that exists between militias and Basrah politicians and security officials.

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE VIOLENCE

¶3. (C) The cleric indicated two possibilities that might avert massive post-PIC bloodshed: (1) a diplomatic bargain struck with Iran that would result in Iran ceasing its support for the militias or (2) the disarming of the Basrah militias. He said Iran exercises pervasive influence over all the militias. The REO director informed the cleric on the coming talks between the United States and Iran in Baghdad later this month. He said that the diplomatic process can be slow and a positive outcome

of the first meeting will be an agreement to meet again. The cleric expressed the hope that the U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iran will not result in "a gift to the enemy."

CLERIC BACKS CIVIC ACTION AGAINST CORRUPT, VIOLENCE

¶4. (C) The cleric described his role in the May 9 demonstrations against the militias and politicians. He said that his Shakheyah sect issued a manifesto directed only at its members to march, but the call was embraced by thousands from other groups who are disgusted with the corrupt and violent forces that are strangling the city. The manifesto accused the politicians, the police, the army and the Emergency Security Committee for causing the "horror" that has befallen Basrah. The manifesto listed the grievances as militia mortar and rocket attacks against the Coalition that are killing Basrah citizens, assassination squads run amok and rampant corruption that has gutted the economy of Iraq's richest region. The protestors warned the militias that "we know who you are" and if you do not cease the acts of violence, the protestors said they would take matters into their own hands. The cleric castigated the Basrah media for spinelessly misreporting the demonstrations solely as protests against the Coalition Forces. (Note: In fairness to the media, many journalists say that honest reporting is a life-threatening undertaking. The frequent assassinations of Basrawis working with the Coalition Forces underscore their concern. End note.)

FUTILE EFFORTS TO STEM VIOLENCE

¶5. (C) The cleric held out little hope that fresh elections would alleviate the city's plight because, he said, the same crooks would return to power via the muzzles of the militia guns. He recounted his futile efforts to effect a reduction of violence by offering money to jobless, uneducated youths to keep them out of the militias and by admonishing militia commanders that their actions are illegal. He said that he has pleaded with them to avoid killing their own people, even if they persist in attacking the Coalition Forces. The REO director

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praised the cleric for his efforts to bring peaceful, civic pressure to bear on the government and added that the U.S. government is looking for ways to help the Basrah moderates in their struggle against the practitioners of violence.

¶6. (C) Comment: The cleric's fears of post-PIC mayhem corroborate those of the REO Basrah. In addition to the cleric, numerous moderate Basrah leaders have said in recent months that for the British to relinquish security responsibility to Iraqis at this juncture would be tantamount to throwing them to the wolves. The anti-militia protest is a good indication of the level of frustration that the citizens of Basrah have with the militias and corruption and shows that they are prepared to take matters into their own hands.

GASTALDO